

After Benghazi: *Security Operations for Transformational Diplomats*

by Marques Bruce

The State Department's Bureau of Diplomatic Security has evolved significantly since it was established following the 1983 bombing of the U.S. Embassy in Lebanon. Likewise, the establishment of the High Threat Programs Directorate (HTP) following the September 11, 2012, attack that resulted in the deaths of Ambassador Christopher Stevens and three other U.S. government employees further advanced the bureau's evolution.¹ While the Department of State (State) has implemented many of the recommendations from the Benghazi Accountability Review Board—convened in the aftermath of the attack—it still needs to acknowledge that security and diplomacy are symbiotic. To do so, State must establish an Under Secretary for Security and place a higher priority on planning security operations, capturing lessons learned, and distributing the results throughout the department. Additionally, the tragic events of Benghazi will recur if State continues to disregard the significance of planning and fails to learn from its mistakes.

Analysis and Discussion

The Accountability Review Board's Interim Progress Report for the Members of the House Republican Conference regarding Benghazi is a scathing indictment of President Obama, then Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, and senior officials in the Bureau of Diplomatic Security for their lack of support and foresight. The findings of Chairman Howard P. McKeon, Representatives Ed Royce, Bob Goodlatte, Darrell Issa, and Mike Rogers assert that if any of the aforementioned people had reacted appropriately, this tragic event might never have happened.² What the report lacks is a realistic critique of the leadership and decision-making process of the most knowledgeable U.S. representative in Libya at the time, Ambassador Stevens.

The President appointed Stevens on June 7, 2012, to represent U.S. interests in Libya. Under the direction of the President, the general supervision of the Secretary of State, and the support of the appropriate regional assistant secretary, the Ambassador or Chief of Mission is in charge of the entire U.S. diplomatic mission and all of its activities.³ Those responsibilities include the

Major Marques A. Bruce is a native of Washington, D.C. and is a graduate of United States Military Academy. His most recent assignment was as the Aide-De-Camp to the Deputy Commanding General of the XVIII Airborne Corps, Fort Bragg, North Carolina.

safety and security of each Mission employee. Like all Ambassadors, Stevens had the trust and confidence of the President to execute his responsibilities. Having worked with rebel leaders prior to and during the revolution that led to the overthrow of the Qaddafi regime, he knew better than anyone the security risks in Benghazi. He likely factored his close ties with the rebel leaders into his decision to travel to Benghazi on September 11, 2012. However, hindsight would indicate that his decision to stay overnight in Benghazi did not factor in other critical elements. So the question is how can we better train and equip ambassadors to identify and mitigate risk?

Were he alive today, Congress would have ruthlessly cross-examined Stevens for approving the mission to Benghazi. He would have to justify the essential mission that placed him, Sean Smith, Tyrone Woods, and Glen Doherty in Benghazi on September 11, 2012, considering the threat he routinely communicated through official cables to Washington. Also, he would have to accept ultimate responsibility for the safety of the personnel who resided with him—he was responsible for everything U.S. Mission Libya did or failed to do. Neither response would be germane to the underlying issues in the Benghazi tragedy though and would fail to answer the remaining question: how is State, specifically the Bureau of Diplomatic Security, going to ensure that something like this does not happen again?

While Stevens had the authority to decide whether or not being in Benghazi on September 11, 2012, was mission essential, the responsibility for planning the security for the trip resided primarily with the Regional Security Officer (RSO). The RSO is an essential member of every diplomatic mission and responsible for providing a safe and secure environment for the conduct of U.S. foreign policy.⁴ All diplomatic posts operate under security policies designed and maintained by the Bureau of Diplomatic

Security, but implemented by RSOs.⁵ RSOs typically serve at posts overseas for two to three years and at high-threat posts for one year.

The RSO in Benghazi, on September 11, 2012, had only been in country a few months and had only minimal area knowledge or situational awareness to advise the ambassador regarding the threat and security environment. Planning security operations in Libya, especially in Benghazi, would be difficult for anyone. It

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requires months to truly understand the threat level no matter how many intelligence reports one has read. To imply that the RSO staff did not have the appropriate training or access to intelligence reports to plan a trip to Benghazi, all of which indicated an increased level of violence directed toward foreigners, would be inappropriate and categorically false.⁶ The RSO in Benghazi, having only spent a few months in the country, was responsible for planning the overnight trip to Benghazi and likely had a profound amount of respect for Stevens' assessment of the security threat, considering the Ambassador's vast in-country experience. He may have objected heavily to an overnight trip to the embassy's special mission compound in Benghazi because the previous RSO deemed security measures inadequate. These concerns were supported by three factors: multiple requests for additional security personnel were routinely denied by State; the intelligence community had reported increased levels of violence highlighted by recent attacks on the British ambassador and International Red Cross members; and a recent bombing of the special mission compound itself just weeks prior to the

September 11, 2012, attack resulted in a gaping hole in the perimeter.⁷

Even the RSO's staunchest objections to Stevens would have only served as a recommendation. If the RSO vehemently disagreed with going to Benghazi based on the threat or felt he lacked the adequate resources to mitigate the risks, he had several courses of action: (1) attempt to persuade the ambassador to schedule a day trip instead of remaining

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overnight; (2) arrange a meeting in a more secure venue at a different time; and (3) elevate his concerns to the regional director in the Diplomatic Security office in Washington. The regional director could engage the ambassador directly, but he would more likely elevate the concern to the Deputy Assistant Secretary or the Assistant Secretary for Diplomatic Security. If overruled, the RSO could ultimately write his objections in a declination statement and have the ambassador sign the document, which would place the RSO in a difficult position.

The ambassador and deputy chief of mission prepare the RSO's annual performance evaluation as the "rater" and "reviewer" respectively. Directly challenging the ambassador with a formal declination statement could adversely impact the RSO's career. The RSO works for the ambassador, who is not normally a security professional and likely does not have the requisite security training or operational experience to effectively assess security officers or programs. The ambassador would be better equipped to serve as a reviewer with the respective regional security director,

who has a wealth of experience and knowledge of how security officers should perform, serving as the rater. The regional director is already responsible for conducting the Post Security Program Review that evaluates 75 security programs, policies, and directives at each post. Given the responsibility an RSO shoulders for security issues at overseas posts, a senior and experienced diplomatic agent and former RSO should rate them.

The disconnect between career diplomats and diplomatic security agents does not only exist at overseas posts. The genesis of this problem is in Washington with the Assistant Secretary for Diplomatic Security falling under the Under Secretary for Management. The State Department should establish an Under Secretary for Security, Law Enforcement, and Intelligence that combines the Bureau of Diplomatic Security, Counterterrorism, International Narcotics and Law Enforcement, and Intelligence and Research. Diplomatic Security warrants its own Under Secretary considering the size of its budget and scope of responsibilities. It supports over 260 posts with more than 2,000 agents, 35,000 contracted security personnel, and an extensive number of technical support personnel and resources. However, security operations today require input and expertise from multiple bureaus within State, and those bureaus should be subordinate to an Under Secretary for Security Operations. This is even more important with the move to "transformational" or "expeditionary diplomacy." The Secretary of State and President deserve non-politicized security assessments from a professional regarding all security matters.

On January 18, 2006, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice gave a speech at Georgetown University on "transformational diplomacy" that signaled a shift in how the U.S. conducts diplomacy. In the aftermath of World War II, as the Cold War hardened into place, the U.S.

turned its diplomatic focus to Europe and parts of Asia. State hired new people, taught them new languages, and gave them new training. The U.S. partnered with old adversaries in Germany and Japan and helped them rebuild their countries. Diplomacy was instrumental in transforming devastated countries into thriving democratic allies, allies who joined with the U.S. for decades in the struggle to defend freedom from communism.

Transformational diplomacy requires the U.S. to move its diplomatic presence out of foreign capitals and to spread it more widely across countries in order to work on the front lines of domestic reform as well as in the back rooms of foreign ministries. There are nearly 200 cities worldwide with over one million people in which the U.S. has no formal diplomatic presence. This is where the action is today and this is where the U.S. must establish a presence. To reach citizens in bustling new population centers, the U.S. cannot always build new consulates beyond a nation's capital. A newer, more economical idea is the American Presence Post (APP). The idea is simple. One of the best diplomats moves outside the embassy to live, work, and represent America in an emerging community of change.⁸

America needs to be bold in its diplomatic efforts to secure its interests abroad—promoting peace and maintaining stability throughout the world. With the push toward a more far-reaching diplomacy, diplomatic security requires an unfiltered and prominent voice at the highest levels of the State Department to ensure support for the nation's diplomatic initiatives. In the aftermath of World War II, President Truman appointed General George C. Marshall, the architect of the Allied victory, to be Secretary of State. General Marshall understood the necessity for security and maintained 3.6 million Allied soldiers in Germany at the end of World War II. Today, diplomatic security agents do not have the luxury of operating under post-

WWII conditions in high-threat posts. To meet today's call for "transformational diplomacy," State must jettison old diplomatic security approaches and embark on bold new initiatives to address new approaches to diplomacy.

A change of this magnitude would not likely be welcome in an organization as steeped in tradition as the American Foreign Service. One diplomatic security agent equated Ambassador Stevens' authority as a Chief of Mission to that

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of an army general expressing a desire to walk the streets of Fallujah wearing nothing but his uniform, an inherently dangerous proposition. While the analogy is approximately right, it does not begin to address the stark contrast between the State Department and the Department of Defense. The first difference is that a general owns most of the assets responsible for providing his security. A division commander can task a brigade to set the conditions for that visit. The Ambassador has his RSO, contracted security, potentially a small Marine security guard detachment, a local guard force, and the protection of the host nation government security forces. The reliability of the local guard force varies from post to post based on the threat and political climate of the host nation.

A second difference is that the general has an entire staff dedicated to planning operations. Currently, the high threats program office has one diplomatic security agent dedicated to future and contingency operations planning. An RSO office can range from one to 14 agents at most posts and up to 80 at contingency operations posts such as Kabul or Baghdad,

which are responsible for both planning and execution. In comparison, a general has scores of planners and thousands of soldiers to execute security operations.

The third reason is a common argument made by diplomatic security agents; the aforementioned general has nearly 30 years of planning and operational experience and understands the burden to his staff and soldiers when he tasks them with a mission. This makes the general uniquely qualified to assume and mitigate security risk in high-threat environments. Ambassadors do not have the operational experience that senior combat leaders accumulate over decades. As such, comparing generals to ambassadors should be limited to responsibilities and authorities, not operational experience, especially when it comes to mitigating risk with potentially deadly consequences.

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Moving out of a foreign capital to an APP is a simple idea, but not one based on the realities of operating in highly unstable cities like Benghazi, especially when securing these facilities is oftentimes an afterthought. While the intent was not to establish APP's in places like Benghazi, Special Mission Compound Benghazi was a "more economical" alternative to advance national interests in Libya.

In 2004, Secretary Rice commissioned an Advisory Committee on Transformational Diplomacy that included some of the finest legislators, diplomats, and business professionals from across America, including former Senator John B. Breaux; Thomas

Pickering, former U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations; U.S. Air Force General Richard Meyers, former Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; and Kenneth T. Derr, retired Chairman and CEO of the Chevron Corporation. This committee identified six areas necessary to transform the State Department, and advance future U.S. diplomatic efforts: (1) Expand and modernize the workforce; (2) Integrate foreign affairs strategic resources; (3) Strengthen the country's ability to shape the world; (4) Harness twenty-first century technology; (5) Engage the private sector; and (6) Streamline State's organizational structure. Most notably absent in the final report was how to meet the security requirements associated with transformation. If State intended to send its best diplomats to "emerging communities of change" to advance U.S. interests, then the advisory committee most certainly owed it to them to have an independent and unfiltered voice advocating for security concerns. Having an Under Secretary for Security Operations on the committee could have been that voice.

Following the events of Benghazi, the President elevated the importance of embassy security within the National Security Council (NSC) by listing it as one of his top national security policy priorities. As part of this elevation, the embassy security portfolio on the NSC was transferred from the Strategic Planning Directorate to the Counterterrorism Division, and the first-ever Diplomatic Security Special Agent was assigned as a Director for Counterterrorism to oversee and direct embassy security. With this level of visibility in the aftermath of Benghazi at the NSC, it would make sense for State to establish an Under Secretary for Security Operations.

Advancing U.S. interests through diplomacy will always be the primary mission of the State Department, and diplomatic security agents will continue to be the ambassadors' security diplomats. International security agreements,

such as the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations, are the cornerstones to conducting diplomacy. However, some countries ignore these agreements, particularly during times of crisis. As such, security agents must serve as the ambassador's diplomats for security by establishing strong relationships with host nation and even regional security forces.

The attack on the U.S. Embassy Pakistan highlights how fragile security agreements can be, placing diplomacy on hold. On November 20, 1979, a Saudi Arabian extremist group raided and seized the Grand Mosque in Mecca. Iran's Ayatollah Khomeini claimed that Americans were behind the attack, a claim that Pakistani news outlets broadcasted repeatedly. This sequence of events led the Pakistani security forces protecting the embassy to not only stand idly by during the ensuing riots (there were reports that they even escorted busloads of protestors to the U.S. embassy). The protest resulted in the deaths of a Marine security guard and a foreign service officer and the evacuation and destruction of the embassy.⁹ This event highlights the fragility of security agreements with a host nation treaty-bound to secure diplomatic missions and emphasizes the importance of cultivating strong relationships between diplomatic security agents and host nation security forces. These relationships are as vital to the success of diplomatic efforts as the daily engagements held by the ambassador.

Contrasting the events in Pakistan in 1979 with the September 11, 2012, attacks makes the decision to be in Benghazi on that day even more confusing. The Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations clearly outlines that the host nation is responsible for the security of foreign diplomats operating within its borders.¹⁰ With the overthrow of Muammar Gaddafi's regime, Libya had no centralized government, particularly in Benghazi, the birthplace of the revolution. As a result, the U.S. established security agreements with local militants and

warlords for the protection of the special mission compound and embassy personnel, which is not an uncommon practice.¹¹ However, the tacit nature of the security arrangement with these state-financed but unofficial security forces should have been cause for the ambassador and RSO to place minimal faith in the militias' willingness and capacity to secure their overnight stay in Benghazi. If the Pakistani Security forces in 1979 could absolve themselves of their clearly outlined security responsibilities per the Vienna Convention based on an accusation of U.S. impropriety, why should militias in Benghazi be expected to secure U.S. diplomats in the midst of a revolution based on informal agreements?

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Relying on militias for security purposes is not an unusual practice and in some cases is required. With the shift to transformational or expeditionary diplomacy, operating in countries with transitional governments is becoming more common. Today diplomats operate or prepare to operate in fragile countries like Libya, Tunisia, the Central African Republic, and South Sudan. The decision to rely on militias to secure Ambassador Stevens in a non-standard diplomatic facility is perplexing. The special mission compound in Benghazi did not even meet the minimum security standards established by the Overseas Security Policy Board or Secure Embassy Construction and Counterterrorism Act of 1999. These standards include 100 meters of setback (the standoff distance from the outer wall to the chancery building) to limit the impact of explosive

devices; anti climb security measures; forced entry and blast resistant windows, walls, and doors; and a myriad of other technical and physical security.

Overseas Security Policy Board and Secure Embassy Construction and Counterterrorism standards greatly enhance the safety for State Department employees overseas. However, embassy personnel routinely assume risk when they travel beyond embassy walls in the interest of advancing diplomacy. To mitigate this risk, the RSO must establish clear standards for conducting travel; the Mission Travel Policy at each post details these procedures. The Benghazi compound was not an embassy, consulate, or APP. Just two cleared U.S. citizens

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and a local guard force secured the Special Mission Compound Benghazi just prior to the attack.¹² Most posts have, at a minimum, a host nation security element, a local guard force, contracted security forces, a marine security guard contingent, and the RSO office to conduct security programs of an embassy or consulate. The most important of these elements are the local guard force and sufficient host government security support.

While the decision to overnight at Benghazi may have resided solely with Stevens, the compound's security posture was the responsibility of the RSO, and the Ambassador's personal protection was the responsibility of the five Assistant Regional Security Officers assigned to him. The general consensus of people who have seen official footage of the Benghazi attack is that the personal security

detail's posture was relaxed. Assuming the detail was aware of the declining security environment in Benghazi, one could hypothesize two conclusions: they had confidence in the local security forces assigned to protect the compound, or they lacked the requisite training or experience to assess the immediate security environment properly and plan to mitigate any threat. The former is rather evident, likely a byproduct of a lack of experience considering the five agents assigned to protect Stevens had a combined total of six years operational experience, were on temporary assignment to Libya, and only one had successfully completed the Basic Regional Security Officer course. The second point regarding a lack of security assessment and planning is highly likely given the junior nature of Stevens' personal protection detail on September 11, 2012.

All diplomatic security agents must attend the Basic Regional Security Officer course prior to an assignment overseas. This course trains agents on numerous subjects including a block of instruction on how to analyze mission requirements and develop courses of action to mitigate potential threats. The process for doing this is referred to as the Deliberate Planning Process. Developed over the last three years by the Bureau of Diplomatic Security, this process is the civilian equivalent to the Army's troop leading procedures and military decision making process—a step in the right direction that will develop future agents' capability to analyze and mitigate risk.

Currently, the newly formed Operations Planning Staff at the bureau headquarters consists of one security agent and three military officers. Having military planners in the security bureau's headquarters benefits the military significantly. Each officer will leave with an extremely relevant set of experiences and greater understanding of how diplomatic security and the State Department operate. Despite their collective experience in planning operations,

these military officers cannot effectively plan diplomatic security operations, as they do not have the obligatory training and experience of a career agent. However, they can assist in planning and integrating military resources, act as a conduit to the regional military command, and apply their new knowledge to military operations after leaving the bureau.

The practice of capturing and sharing best practices is essential and potentially lifesaving for U.S. foreign mission personnel. On September 13, 2013, the consulate in Herat, Afghanistan, was the target of a complex attack involving a vehicle-borne improvised explosive device followed by an insurgent assault attempting to gain access to the consulate compound. The Operations Planning Staff drafted an after-action review (AAR) of the attack by compiling the history of Consulate Herat and documenting the mitigation efforts of the four RSOs who had served there in the years prior to the attack. The AAR was then presented during the diplomatic security's High Threat Programs RSO Workshop. Many in attendance expressed a desire to have access to the AAR so they could share the lessons learned with their respective staff members back at their overseas posts. As of the date of this article, the brief remains unreleased due to the close-hold nature of State. The tragedy of this anecdote is an all too common practice where security concerns inhibit learning and more effective operations across the diplomatic security service. The routine argument is, "What happens if this information gets leaked? How will this make the Bureau look?" and a favorite, "Does this pass the Washington Post test?"

Conclusions and Recommendations

Many of the post-Benghazi review board recommendations warrant an increased emphasis on planning at the executive level within the Bureau of Diplomatic Security. The "new normal" is an interagency effort

to ensure collaboration between DoD, State, and other federal agencies in providing security assistance to U.S. foreign missions in dangerous environments and in times of crisis. The renewed emphasis on collaboration after Benghazi is absolutely essential. DoD cannot plan operations in support of foreign missions effectively without consulting the ambassador or chief of mission. As such, combatant commands like the Joint Special Operations Command and Africa Command have diplomatic security agents on their staff as liaison officers to help identify requirements needed to provide

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adequate and timely support and coordination. Several senior military leaders recognize the importance of planning and coordinating with the Bureau of Diplomatic Security in this "new normal" environment. However, the newly formed operation planning staff at the Bureau's headquarters has neither the manpower nor the appropriate training needed to formally plan and coordinate the volume of requirements.

As it stands today, Diplomatic Security has yet to publish the firsthand account or debriefing with the RSO in Tripoli concerning the death of Ambassador Stevens. Four U.S. citizens died in Benghazi because Stevens placed too much trust in the local militias and failed to plan sufficiently in order to mitigate the existing threat. The power to change this dynamic resides in Bureau of Diplomatic

Security today. It would start with officially debriefing the RSO assigned to U.S. Mission Libya in Tripoli during the September 11, 2012, attack; compiling a formal AAR; and distributing it along with the review of the defense of Consulate Herat to RSOs around the world. It would also include a significant expansion of the operations planning staff at Bureau headquarters and training on the deliberate planning process in the Basic Regional Security Officer course. Finally, the State Department, White House, and Congress must recognize that establishing an Under Secretary for Security Operations is in its best interests and critical to the future success of diplomatic security and security of U.S. Foreign Service personnel.

These changes would be contrary to the existing culture for many stated reasons, but if the deaths of four Americans in Benghazi and the subsequent political turmoil are not enough to warrant them, then what will? **IAJ**

NOTES

- 1 Unclassified Benghazi Accountability Review Board, pp. 7–8, <[www.state.gov /documents/organizations/202446.pdf](http://www.state.gov/documents/organizations/202446.pdf)>, accessed on June 17, 2014.
- 2 “Interim Progress Report for the Members of House Republican Conference on the Events Surrounding the September 11, 2012, Terrorist Attacks in Benghazi, Libya,” April 23, 2013.
- 3 “Overseas Building Operations,” *Foreign Affairs Manual*, Department of State, Vol. 15, 15 FAM 113.2, Chief of Mission/Principal Officer, October 11, 2013.
- 4 Department of State, Bureau of Diplomatic Security webpage, <<http://www.state.gov/m/ds>>, accessed on June 17, 2014.
- 5 Ibid.
- 6 Eric Nordstrom, Benghazi RSO, September, 21, 2011—July 26, 2012. In testimony to the Benghazi Congressional Subcommittee, 4:05–4:15, <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=44J1uT5KYAc>>, accessed on June 18, 2014.
- 7 Interim Progress Report.
- 8 Secretary Condoleezza Rice, speech at Georgetown University, Washington, January 18, 2006, <<http://2001-2009.state.gov/secretary/rm/2006/59306.htm>>, accessed on June 11, 2014.
- 9 Charles W. Bennet, *Is There any Hope for Us: The Story of the Attack on the United States Embassy, Islamabad, Pakistan, on Wednesday, November 21, 1979*, 2nd edition, Islamabad, Pakistan, February 2013, pp. 9–45.
- 10 Vienna Convention of 1961.
- 11 Eric Nordstrom, 3:00–3:45.
- 12 “Diplomatic Security,” *Foreign Affairs Manual*, Department of State, Vol. 12, 12 FAM 315.2, Application of Statutory Requirements and OSPB Security Standards, October 11, 2013, paragraph d.